

affinities. It is absent in *Pityriasis* which might or might not confirm an affinity with the Prionopidae. It is present in *Bombycilla garrulus* and present but poorly defined in *Hypocolius ampelinus*, and were this of vital significance it would separate them from the shrikes and related families with which they are grouped by some taxonomists.

Although when used as a single character the taxonomic value of the presence of this process is uncertain, it does provide additional morphological variation which might be useful in conjunction with other characters.

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The Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) breeding in the Maltese Islands

by J. Sultana

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The Maltese islands, with an area of 122 square miles and a population of well over 300,000, lack large uninhabited areas, permanent fresh water, woods and other suitable habitats for most breeding birds. Apart from this, bird protection is non-existent, and so one is not surprised to find that the number of the islands' breeding birds is very limited. It was, therefore, with some satisfaction that last year I added *Passer montanus* to the list. J. Gibb (1951) did not meet with this species during his stay in Malta but he included it in the list of species that breed in Sicily and for which there is suitable habitat in the Maltese islands.

The Tree Sparrow has previously been recorded as an irregular and scarce passage migrant. A. Schembri (1843) listed it as rather rare and erroneously stated that it bred. In fact he begged C. A. Wright (1864) "to correct an error he fell into, in saying that this species bred in Malta". G. Despott (1917) mentions that it occurred in fair numbers in the autumn of 1912, and he did not include it in "The Breeding Birds of Malta". E. L. Roberts (1954) did not mention that *Passer montanus* may have bred or is breeding in the Maltese islands and he wrote "Dr. DeLucca records a pair of the nominate race taken at Gnejna in the autumn 1947. He believes that great numbers of Tree Sparrows pass at irregular intervals of years, and that a few may pass every year during autumn." C. & V. DeLucca (1959) mention an example which was taken in October 1958 and they state that it is a very scarce and irregular species. C. De Lucca (1967) gives another record of one taken in December 1966 at Wied id-Dis, vicinity of Gharghur.

On 30th April, 1967, while bird watching at Marsalforn Valley, limits of Xaghra, in Gozo, I heard frequent calls of the Tree Sparrow and after further investigation I saw that some were darting in and out under the arches of a limestone bridge. I noted at least four pairs of *Passer montanus* and six pairs of *Passer hispaniolensis* going in crevices in the arches. I also noted that the

spaces used by the Tree Sparrows were narrower and deeper than those of the Spanish Sparrows and this made it impossible to examine a nest. On 19th May, 1967, I visited the place again with Flt.-Lt. D. Elphick, then serving with the R.A.F. in Malta, who identified the Tree Sparrows going in the cracks, one of which being less than a foot away from a Spanish Sparrow's nest. Two days later I again visited the place, this time with J. Attard, Chairman of the Malta Ornithological Society, and we located an accessible nest, 11 feet above ground level, in which were four eggs.

On 27th July, 1967, I examined and ringed a young Tree Sparrow which had just left its nest under the bridge and the next day I located another nest with three young, but these were taken away by a labourer who happened to be working in that area.

Since April 1962 I had other reports of Tree Sparrows breeding at Ghajnsielem, Xaghra and Nadur in Gozo and at Wied Incita in Malta, but these were never confirmed.

This year, 1968, no nests were found in the bridge as the holes were filled up with cement by the Public Works Dept. in autumn 1967. But during June and July I located three others under the arches of a similar bridge a quarter of a mile further up the valley. Though the young could be heard, the nests could not be examined as they were also in narrow cracks in the ceiling about 18 feet above the ground.

Another nest was located in May 1968 by E. Spiteri Campbell, a committee member of the M.O.S.; this contained five young and was the first record for the island of Malta. Situated in a hole in a wall surrounding a garden at Santa Venera, a small suburban town, the nest was eight feet above the ground and was well concealed by an orange tree.

In August 1968, I found another nest with young at the village of Xaghra. It was in a deep narrow hole in the facade of a house, only five feet above the ground and facing a busy road. Some of the local people reported to me other nests at Xaghra which I could not confirm.

It is worthy of mention that a Tree Sparrow which I ringed on 19th August, 1967 at Marsalforn Valley was retrapped on 17th May, 1968 and again on 7th August, 1968. Two others which were ringed both on 17th May, 1968 were retrapped on 7th August, 1968, one of which was trapped again on 20th August, 1968.

Following is a list of other records of *Passer montanus* seen in the Maltese islands from January 1967 until June 1968.

1967	
January	One ringed at Lunzjata.
March	One in the vicinity of Rabat and three at Marsalforn Valley.
July	15+ roosting in a mulberry tree at Marsalforn.
August	Two parties of 20+ each, one at Marsalforn Valley and the other at Ramla (noted on most days).
September	Same as for August.
October	Noted frequently singly or in small parties in various localities in Malta and Gozo. Passages took place from middle of the month till 22nd, during which period flocks of up to 50+ were not infrequently noted over Mtahleb in Malta and Xaghra in Gozo.

November	Few seen coming in over Mthaleb on the 4th. Three were noted at Chadwick Lakes and nine at Ramla.
December	20+ present at Ramla.
1968	
January to March	Maximum of 50 present at Ramla and Marsalforn Valley. A pair was noted during the last week of March at Chadwick Lakes.
April	Ten at Ramla and three at Floriana.
June	Four at San Blass, Nadur.

I wish to thank E. Elphick, J. Attard and E. Spiteri Campbell for their help already mentioned in the text. I am also indebted to C. Gauci for helping me in the observations and to V. Vella Muskat, Secretary of the Malta Bird Observatory, for the retrap records.

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A goose hybrid with the head pattern of the Giant Canada Goose

by James M. Harrison and Jeffery G. Harrison

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The Anatidae are becoming recognised as a most fruitful source of hybrids, in which the progeny reveal characters which may be foreign to either parent, and these may bear a strong resemblance to some other species within this group. We believe that this arises as a recombination of recessive genes during hybridization, but it can also arise as a variant in certain individuals without there being apparently any question of hybridization. We also believe that these characters when revealed provide evidence of phylogenetic relationship.

This view has been supported by Dr. B. M. Slizynski, who investigated the chromosomes of a Northern Shoveler \times European Wigeon (Slizynski 1964) and who subsequently wrote to J.M.H. as follows with regard to variants: "They must result from genes carried latently within a species group, which from some factor or mechanism at present obscure has become phenotypically visible and appears sporadically in individuals in some closely related species in which they are normally latent or suppressed."

Most hybrid examples demonstrating this phenomenon have occurred in the ducks Anatinae, but it also occurs in goose hybrids. The present example